

### Bureaucrats, Democrats Clash Over Drug Plan

**By Marni Pyke**

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Government officials are bristling over congressional criticism that the new Medicare, Part D drug plan fails to provide promised discounts for participants.

Chicago-area Democrats released a report Friday concluding that prescriptions purchased through insurance companies participating in Part D cost more than those bought online, in stores or in Canada.

"Turning the Medicare benefit over to private drug plans is not just complicated and confusing, it's incredibly costly," U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky said at a press conference.

But Douglas O'Brien, regional director for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shot back that the study contained "gross inaccuracies."

"It's really a disservice to beneficiaries to put out a misleading statement like this," O'Brien said.

The government rolled out Medicare Part D Jan. 1. The policy provides subsidized medication

for seniors and people with disabilities. It is administered through private health insurance companies.

Democratic staff with the House Government Reform Committee studied the average cost of 10 commonly used drugs from 10 different insurance plans offered in the Chicago area.

They concluded the prices were 80 percent more than veterans pay for medicine purchased by the federal government in bulk. The drugs were 65 percent higher compared to ones bought in Canada, 6 percent more than those at Drugstore.com and nearly 2 percent higher than at Costco.

The findings plus mass confusion caused by the more than 40 drug plans offered in Illinois prove that "Part D stands for disaster," said Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat.

O'Brien lambasted the report writers as "cherry-picking" certain drugs to paint a negative picture.

He called the comparison with drug prices for veterans deceptive, since the government provides a limited number of drugs that can only be picked up at Department of Veterans Affairs facilities.

Friday's report comes on heels of a recent announcement from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, stating that Illinois will save \$32 million in 2006 as a result of Medicare reform.

The group also heralded the fact Part D will cost \$678 billion over the next 10 years rather than the \$737 billion originally predicted.

Democratic critics say the Medicare bill was influenced by pharmaceutical companies. They want Congress to let Medicare run the drug program and negotiate prices. They also hope to

extend a May 15 deadline to sign up for Part D without incurring late fees.

U.S. Rep. Judy Biggert, a Hinsdale Republican, said changing the timeframe would lead to more procrastination.

"At some point, you need to set a deadline," she said.

At the hearing, several seniors testified about problems with the new drug program.

"Dealing with the IRS is simple compared with Medicare Part D," said Jack Ehrlich, a retired accountant and lawyer.

Tony Plaia testified that although he should have been covered by Part D, he kept running into roadblocks and exorbitant costs when he tried to buy medicine for his wife.

"My wife said, 'What will I do?'" he recounted. "I said, 'maybe we don't eat tomorrow, but you get your pills.'"